

Stockdale likely to leave imprint

By T. CURTIS FORBES

"Inspiring" is the word most used to describe Vice Adm. James B. Stockdale by his colleagues. Other frequently used tags are "tough, bright, and determined."

"If he were a runner, he would probably be in next week's marathon. If he were a politician, like Naval Academy classmate Jimmy Carter, he would be president."

But no way could Stockdale, who took over command of the Naval War College this week be a runner. Shot down over Vietnam, he broke his shoulder when he was ejected from his supersonic F-8 single seat fighter. He was stripped naked, rolled down the street, and beaten until one of his knees was shattered. That was only the beginning.

Four of his more than seven years in prison were in solitary confinement. His body was so twisted with ropes in torture sessions that his feet were stuffed into his mouth; his face was battered; his bad leg was kicked and infected with raw sewage; he was confined in his own filth in stocks and leg irons for weeks.

Stockdale cut his scalp and pounded his face with a stool so that he would be too disfigured to be used for propaganda pictures. Once he slashed his wrists so that he would not be forced to implicate fellow American prisoners. That act earned him the Medal of Honor.

"Gory but true," he once told a reporter who asked about the accuracy of the account. Stockdale talks about the whole experience with a matter-of-factness that is disarming.

He could be talking about his days in prep school except that he did not have the privilege of attending a good private boys' school.

Stockdale is also not likely to be presi-

dent. He is just a bit too direct. During his change-of-command address Thursday, he lost no time letting the faculty know his mind.

Professionals in the audience shifted uneasily in their seats when he spoke of "blind spots in critical areas" of the college's disciplines.

He softened the criticism with a preface that the faculty is second to none and the disciplines are the right ones, but there was no mistaking the fact that the college's new president is going to leave an imprint on the college rivalling that of some of his illustrious predecessors.

"We don't expect a Turner revolution, but nonetheless the college will not be the same when Stockdale leaves it," a longtime observer of the college said.

According to sources, Stockdale, the most highly decorated officer in the service, could have had any job in the Navy.

"That's not quite so," he said in an impromptu interview yesterday, "But I probably would have chosen this place, if I had a choice."

Despite the spontaneity of the interview, much was revealed about the man. This reporter had covered the change of command ceremony and received a handwritten copy of the admiral's speech.

The first thing yesterday morning, he received a telephone call from the admiral, an offer to help decipher the text.

Lesser officers in the past have been accessible only after laborious negotiations, sometimes lasting months.

Stockdale's offer to assist was most welcome. Much of his text was written in code used in prison.

"It's the quadratic code, which someone remembered from Korea. It goes like this — the admiral began tapping out letters with both hands on a conference table in his office.

The reporter was a few minutes tardy for the meeting. He had gone to the old office of the president. A staff member there offered to lead the writer through the labyrinth of corridors to the president's office. "Are you certain you have a meeting with the president now? I and other staff members have an appointment with him."

The president put everyone quickly at ease by asking the staff members to stand by for about half an hour while, "I talk with my guest from the press."

Stockdale wasted no time getting down to the meat of the session. After an opening apology, "I don't expect you to come running over here everytime I call, but I did feel that the speech in its handwritten form was a bit rough."

He proceeded to fill in the coded words with the rapidity of a machine gun, but what he really wanted to do was to expand on his message of the preceding day, "the

realization of at least 10 years of dreams."

He spoke almost reverently of the college's second president, Alfred Thayer Mahan, "the oracle of Newport" and of the timelessness of Mahan's speeches "always addressed to 'the gentlemen of the Navy — which I thought was classy.'"

He stressed the importance of style rather than hardware and noted "that in the profession of arms, historic evidence indicates that the method of their employment is at least as important to victory as their design."

He urged the study of history and distrust for simplistic historic analogies. He recalled Mahan's preoccupation with history.

"I get lots of mail about the curriculum, but the best advice has been from a boyhood friend who told me to ignore all of it and get about my own business." That advice was from another academy classmate, Stansfield Turner, former college president and now director of the CIA.

Stockdale will draw deeply from his recent "rather unique" experience. He will try to illuminate the student body to the psychological and subjective as well as the objective totality of the human experience called war.

"War is serious business. People get mad. Laws of logic are valueless in bargaining. It's like the marketplace, a duel on a national scale...I think the professional man can learn some bad habits by leading a life that is totally devoted to orderly processes. Duels and street fights are not orderly processes...I think we can be grossly misled by some so-called defense intellectuals of the sort not uncommonly appearing now — post Vietnam."

In a speech "Education for Leadership and Survival" given earlier this year at South Kent School, Stockdale put it this way:

"These are not new ideas but I want to reaffirm the value of mature consciousness of the lessons of the classics and to emphasize the relative uselessness under stress of some of the functional things we are told are so important. After having learned all these lessons, I remember being disappointed about a month after I was back when one of my young friends and prison mates came running up after a reunion at the Naval Academy. He said with glee, 'this is really great, you won't believe how this country has advanced. They've practically done away with the Plebe Year at the academy and they've got computers in the basement of Bancroft Hall.'"

I thought, 'My God, if there was anything that helped us get through those eight years, it was Plebe Year, and if anything screwed up that war, it was computers!'"

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